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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest reviews the history of the multigrade classroom, and summarizes research findings on multigrading effects on achievement and attitude. It also states requirements of teaching and learning in multigrade classrooms. Multigrade classrooms have ranged from the one-room schools of the early 1900s to the ungraded classroom of the 1960s and 1970s, to the cost effective two grade classrooms of today. Teachers are usually not trained to work in multigrade classrooms, and they face the challenge of working in school systems where single grade classrooms are the norm. Research evidence indicates that being a student in a multigrade classroom does not negatively affect academic performance, social relationships, or attitudes. Skills and behaviors required of multigrade teachers may be different, and coordinating activities can be more difficult. Six key instructional dimensions affecting successful multigrade teaching have been identified from multigrade research: (1) classroom organization; (2) classroom management and discipline; (3) instructional organization and curriculum; (4) instructional delivery and grouping; (5) self-directed learning; and (6) peer tutoring. Effective teachers share instructional responsibilities with students. A context of clear rules and routines help students develop independence. Teachers plan whole-class instruction that revolves around open task activities. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools May 1991

Teaching and Learning in the Multigrade Classroom: Student Performance and Instructional Routines

EDO-RC-91-6

THE MULTIGRADE CLASSROOM is an organizational pattern widely used in schools in the United States. Typically a feature of small-scale schooling, multigrade classrooms are today getting a closer look. This Digest, written for practitioners, parents, and policymakers, brings together recent information on the topic. It considers the history of the multigrade classroom, its effects on achievement and attitude, and the requirements of teaching and learning in multigrade classrooms.

History and background

In 1918, there were 196,037 one-room schools, representing 70.8 percent of all public schools in the United States. By 1980, less than 1,000 of these schools remained (Muse, Smith, & Barker, 1987). But the multigrade classroom persists. For example, in a study consisting of multigrade classrooms of only two grades, Rule (1983) used a sample from a suburban district outside Phoenix, Arizona. Of the 21,000 elementary students in the district, approximately 17 percent were in classrooms that combined grades. In rural, small elementary schools the incidence of students served in multigrade classrooms may well be much higher.

Although rural, small schools may combine grades to save money, in the guise of the "ungraded classroom," multigrade organization has also been a feature of urban and suburban districts. In the 1960s and 1970s, "open education" and individualized instruction became influential curriculum and instructional models. Such models were commonly implemented with multigrade classrooms. Energized by developmental theories of learning, a large influx in federal money, and student-centered models of instruction, open education became a major educational innovation. As a result, multigrade classrooms received new attention.

Numerous studies compared the effectiveness of "open" classrooms (multigrade organization with student-centered ethos and methods) and "regular" classrooms (single-grade organization with traditional ethos and methods). We have learned a great deal from these innovative efforts. Working in an open, multigrade school requires serious, ongoing teacher training and a commitment to hard work.

Most teachers have been trained to work in single-grade classrooms. Their knowledge of teaching method is based on whole-class instruction and small-group instruction (with groups often formed on the basis of ability or achievement level). When placed in a multigrade setting, teachers of the 60s and 70s discovered that the time requirements and skills needed to be effective were simply *not part of their prior training and experience.* Although the premises of "open" and "regular" (traditional) education can differ sharply, this finding still applies to multigrade classrooms in traditional schools.

The norm of the graded school

The large-scale innovations of the 60s and 70s have virtually ended. But the multigrade classroom persists, especially in small, rural schools. Yet, here, as elsewhere, most people view graded schools as the *natural way to organize education.* This norm can be a handicap for anyone (whether out of necessity or by theoretical design) who wants to—or who must—work with multigrade classrooms or schools. Teachers of multigraded classrooms who face the biggest challenge may be those working in school systems in which single-grade classrooms are the norm.

For many rural educators, multigrade instruction is not an experiment or a new educational trend, but a necessity imposed, in part, by economic and geographic conditions. In an environment dominated by graded schools, the decision to combine grades can be quite difficult—especially if constituents feel shortchanged by the decision. Nonetheless, recent proposals for school restructuring reflect renewed interest in multigrade organization (Cohen, 1989) and in small-scale organization generally. Such work may eventually contest the norm of the graded school.

Effects on student performance

Many teachers, administrators, and parents continue to wonder whether or not multigrade organization has negative effects on student performance. Research evidence indicates that being a student in a multigrade classroom does not negatively affect academic performance, social relationships, or attitudes.

Miller (1990) reviewed 13 experimental studies assessing academic achievement in single-grade and multigrade classrooms and found there to be no significant differences between them. The data clearly support the multigrade classroom as a viable and *equally effective* organizational alternative to single-grade instruction. The limited evidence suggests there may be significant differences depending on subject or grade level. Primarily, these studies reflect the complex and variable nature of school life. Moreover, there are not enough such studies to make safe generalizations about which subjects or grade levels are best for multigrade instruction.

When it comes to student affect, however, the case for multigrade organization appears much stronger. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81 percent favored the multigrade classroom (Miller, 1990).

If this is the case, why then do we not have more schools organized into multigrade classrooms? One response is that history and convention dictate the prevalence of graded classrooms. However, there is a related, but more compelling, answer to be found in the classrooms themselves and in information drawn from classroom practitioners.

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Instructional and organizational routines

The multigrade classroom can be more of a challenge than the single-grade classroom. Skills and behavior required of the teacher may be different, and coordinating activities can be more difficult. In fact, such a realization is one reason graded schools came into being in the first place (Callahan, 1962).

At first look, the skills needed to teach well in the multigrade and the single-grade (multilevel) classroom appear to be quite similar. The differences between the two sorts of classrooms may be more a product of socialization and expectation than of fact. Clearly, if a teacher in either sort of classroom fails to address differences among students, the effectiveness of instruction suffers. Likewise, teachers are harmed when they have not been adequately prepared to teach students with varying ages and abilities—no matter what sort of classroom they work in.

But what does the research tell us regarding the skills required of the multigrade teacher? When student diversity increases, whether it be in a multigrade or single-grade classroom, greater demand is placed on teacher resources, both cognitive and emotional.

Six key instructional dimensions affecting successful multigrade teaching have been identified from multigrade classroom research (Miller, 1991). Note that each of these points has some bearing on the related issues of independence and interdependence. It is important to cultivate among students the habits of responsibility for their own learning, but also their willingness to help one another learn.

1. **Classroom organization**: Instructional resources and the physical environment to facilitate learning.
2. **Classroom management and discipline**: Classroom schedules and routines that promote clear, predictable instructional patterns, especially those that enhance student responsibility for their own learning.
3. **Instructional organization and curriculum**: Instructional strategies and routines for a maximum of cooperative and self-directed student learning based on diagnosed student needs. Also includes the effective use of time.
4. **Instructional delivery and grouping**: Methods that improve the quality of instruction, including strategies for organizing group learning activities across and within grade levels.
5. **Self-directed learning**: Students' skills and strategies for a high level of independence and efficiency in learning individually or in combination with other students.
6. **Peer tutoring**: Classroom routines and students' skills in serving as "teachers" to other students within and across differing grade levels.

In the multigrade classroom, more time must be spent in organizing and planning for instruction. Extra materials and strategies must be developed so that students will be meaningfully engaged. This additional coordination lets the teacher meet with small groups or individuals, while other work continues.

Since the teacher cannot be everywhere or with each student simultaneously, the teacher shares instructional responsibilities with students. *A context of clear rules and routines* makes such shared responsibility productive. Students know what the teacher expects. They know what assignments to work on, when they are due, how to get them graded, how to get extra help, and where to turn assignments in.

Students learn how to help one another and themselves. At an early age, students are expected to develop independence. The effective multigrade teacher establishes a climate to promote and develop this independence. For example, when young students enter the classroom for the first time, they receive help and guidance not only from the teacher, but from older students. In this way, they also learn that *the teacher is not the only source of knowledge.*

Instructional grouping practices also play an important role in a good multigrade classroom. The teacher emphasizes the similarities among the different grades and teaches to them, thus conserving valuable teacher time. For example, whole-class (cross-grade) instruction is often used since the teacher can have contact with more students. However, whole-class instruction in the effective multigrade classroom differs from what one generally finds in a single-grade class.

Multigrade teachers recognize that whole-class instruction must revolve around open task activities if all students are to be engaged. For example, a teacher can introduce a writing assignment through topic development where all students "brainstorm" ideas. In this context, students from all grades can discuss different perspectives. They can learn to consider and respect the opinions of others (Miller, 1989).

Cooperation is a necessary condition of life in the multigrade classroom. All ages become classmates, and this closeness extends beyond the walls of the school to include the community.

Rewards and challenges

There are many rewards for teaching in the multigrade classroom, but there are challenges, too. Instruction, classroom organization, and management are complex and demanding. A teacher cannot ignore developmental differences in students nor be ill-prepared for a day's instruction. Demands on teacher time require well-developed organizational skills.

The multigrade classroom is not for the timid, inexperienced, or untrained teacher. Clearly, the implications for teacher educators, rural school board members, administrators, and parents are far-reaching.

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